

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Poems By Susan E. Stemont

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by

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This is a creative thesis project consisting of several poems written and revised during the Spring Semester, 1988. The poems encompass a variety of subjects, with special attention to structure.

Most of my previous poetry, written in English 301 and 401, had been completely linear, often without stanzaic breaks. They usually consisted of very short lines broken at natural pause points. While this was effective for short, simple pieces, as I began to write longer poems with shifts in tone, I began to require more range in structure. Part of the reason I was anxious to work on this project was to see what I could do with structure, particularly with longer poems.

While I was working on this group of poems, some pieces seemed to fall into structured forms naturally, of themselves--others seemed to require the application of a well placed crowbar. Usually, I would not fight to impose a structure unless the piece seemed to need one.

In some of the enclosed works, particularly the shorter poems, I decided to retain the linear unbroken structure I had already been using. In "Black Oak," a revision of an older work, for example, I felt that imposing a more rigid structure would detract from the shamanistic quality of the poem.

"Golem," on the other hand, began as a series of four staggered stanzas, two of which proved superfluous on final revision. The staggering of the stanzas also seemed to distract from the whole. In the final revision, "Golem" takes on three stanzas with staggered lines

within the stanza; an effect I feel is congenial with the evolutionary subject, without being jarring.

The other goal of this project was to expand my subject range. For me, poetry is primarily an emotional experience filtered through the intellect. I don't feel I could ever write a purely cerebral poem. As a result, my work is always deeply personal, and early drafts sometimes suffer from a lack of distance. In subsequent drafts, I try to filter out the excesses while retaining the emotional quality. Sometimes this works, and sometimes not. Forced to choose, I will almost always opt for the emotional impact, even at the risk of seeming excessive.

Over this semester I have written poems on a number of different subjects. Most of my previous works were either love poems or nature poems. These are still the subjects with which I feel most comfortable, but I have begun to extend into other areas as well. It was interesting to find that I could produce strong poems on subjects which reflected other important areas of my life. I feel this is particularly true with "In Therapy" and "The Blue House."

On the whole, working on this project this semester has allowed me greater flexibility than I might have had in a regular poetry writing class. It has also allowed me to work on a one-to-one basis with Professor Stryk, which would have been more difficult in a regular class situation. I feel I have grown more comfortable with structure in my work, and I have become less hesitant about approaching different subjects.

Black Oak

Black oak
Adder-stick
charred by lightning
forgotten by the gods--
grows twisted
bleeding life
like venom
from its wound
Black agony
against the winter sky
Black oak
Adder-stick
falls
to the ground
silent
wet and gleaming
It writhes in the snow
and disappears
like ice melting

Susan E. Stemont

■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■
■■■■■, ■■■■ ■■■■

Afternoon Nap Without You

Sleepy
and wistful
this damp grey afternoon
with meridians between us
I can almost feel
your arms around me
can almost hear
the gentle rise
and fall of your voice
wordless and comforting
I nestle close
against the white cat
hide my naked arms
beneath the pillow
and feeling our love
all around me
in the blankets
I remember
the warmth of your breath
and whisper
your name

Susan E. Stemont

[REDACTED] e [REDACTED]

Eden At 2 a.m.

Only half awake
in the motionless dark
of a summer night
I stand at my dresser
shaking the dreams
from my eyes
In the mirror
there is a rose garden
with every flower
full blown
A heavy fragrance
lingers in the still air
A petal drops
and still no one comes
through the gate
and no one
tries the latch
Outside
I hear an owl scream
again and again
I turn away from the garden
back to my empty bed

Promise

If we ever make love again
I will turn the clock face
to the wall
and we will not have to read
the hard numbers
from across the room
like a prophecy

If we ever make love again
we will never stop
making love
again

I promise

I would turn the music down
and savour every whispered word
and even our loudest shouts
would not drown in Mozart
And under the blankets
I would have stars planted
to take with me
wherever I go

Susan E. Stemont

██████████ ██████████ ██████████
██████████, ██████████ ██████████

Catharsis

Tonight my floors shine, newly waxed
and every closet is in perfect order
Not a single hair of yours
is left on the bathroom tile
Not a fingerprint on the door
Socks are stacked in rows like eggs
according to color and size
I threw away the pink towel
we used to spread across the bed
and tore up the sheets for dust cloths
It was like clearing a house
where someone has died.

But when I got to the drawer
that holds your letters
buried under layers of silk and lace
I could not touch them
and left the stuff in disarray
like a scattering of leaves
where mice have been
There are some things still
I can not bear to throw away
And in the faded mirror
I can not rub hard enough
to get the pain out of my eyes.

Going Back

Crossing 32nd Street
for the first time
in eighteen years
I realized
I had forgotten
the cottonwoods
and paused
in front of St. Mary's
to watch that slow
gentle
falling
of sweet and painful white
spinning in whirlpools
along the cracked sidewalk
gathering on the stairs
like dust

Money-stealers
we called them
and when my mother held me
in her arms
she said
"Look at the snow!"
and I delighted
in that summer fluff
that drifted down from nowhere
and got into everything
and in her hair
so long ago
How far I've gone
only to come back
to this small thing
that never changes

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Cabin Fever

Snow again this morning

The body
I woke up with
can not be mine
There is some mistake
and I don't know who to call
to fix it

A red-tail hawk has embedded
its talons in my stomach
All night it hung tight on me
This morning I sat
on the cold tile of the bathroom floor
with a mouthful of feathers
crying
because I could not throw it up

For the third time this week
I have lost my keys
Searching through the desk
like a rat on amphetamine
I find instead
the phone bill I forgot to pay
I ask God
when it will all be over
and I can sleep--
oh sweet sleep--
like a child again

A crack in the winter sky
shows a streak of blue
and sun passes the venetian blinds
spilling gold bars
across the hardwood floor
A sparrow hits the window--
snow blind--
and the sky seals itself up again

Snow again tonight

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[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Letitia
Whose name means "joy"

Tish
our reunion brings my old life back
tapping on my window
with a bony finger
insisting
I pay attention to my ghosts
call them up
for some strange exorcism
that is always
futile

Sitting in your apartment
only a few streets down
from where I was born
from the place where my father died
we sip herb tea
instead of Southern Comfort
play music
full of memory

Remember this place
 this taste
the peculiar smell
of furniture oil
and you fatehr's cigars
 Hear my mother's whisper
 glass breaking
 a dog barking

Breathless

We speak of loves
won and lost again
Look for fathers
in the eyes of strangers
mothers
in clouded mirrors
You love your niece
she has adopted you
I want a child
and can not afford the years

Letitia
you fill in the blanks
and I am afraid of the words
we use to complete the puzzle
Afraid of the words to the song
on the stereo
Afraid of my own words too
bleeding
across the page

Golem (first version)

Did you feel like
Michelangelo
I wonder
Or like God
When beneath your hands
The edges of me softened
and resolved--
your foolish clay

Caught up in the process
of being born
There was no time
for questions
I took breath
from your kisses
Sustenance
from your words
And became drunk
on your eyes
drinking me

But when your hands
stopped their soft modeling
When the rich food
of your love
was gone
This cold clay
fell to earth--
nameless

Feeding on my pain
I have devoured myself
in order to live
Aching for the morphine
of touch
I have molded myself
from within
You would not recognize
the work you wrought

Fully formed
with secret hands
I have become my own
at last

Recreated
in my own image

Golem

Did you feel like
Michelangelo
I wonder

Or like God
When beneath your hands
The edges of me softened
and resolved--
your foolish clay

Caught up in the process
of being born

There was no time
for questions

I took breath
from your kisses

Sustenance
from your words

And became drunk
on your eyes
drinking me

Feeding on my pain
I have devoured myself
in order to live
Aching for the morphine
of touch

I have molded myself
from within

You would not recognize
the work you wrought

In Therapy

Anna

how much longer
must we cut along the scar-line?
I am so tired
of crying in the mirror
and carrying my cross
from one Good Friday
to the next
never happy
not yet
after all this time

In your confessional
filled with green plants
I dream of lost Edens
that never were
remember the shouting
twenty years ago
and hear it all again
all over again
and again
like thunder

But I can not seem
to quell it
to the whisper
of a quenching rain
only my own frenzied
Act of Contrition
offered in the night
to a God
I don't believe in
asking why

Anna

we all have stigmata to bear
The wounds
do not heal
even if we pound the nails in
again
And all this labor
to roll away the stone
from an empty tomb
is useless

The Blue House

I keep looking at it
walking back and forth
along the cracked sidewalk
Smell the old wood of it
and the leaf mold
under the eaves
where the roof is coming up
on the north side

Ride my bicycle
thorough the dusty alley
past the backyard
where two Norway maples
stretch horizontally
Cast blue shadows
on a raggy lawn
scattered with winged seeds

I stare at the long
diagonal cracks in the limestone
where a stream of ants
wind an agitated path
Count the broken windows
the yards of gutter rusted through
Stand across the street
and calculate the angle of its lean

And I speak to the place
as if I knew it some time
somewhere else
The house numbers
add up to my birthdate
I am looking for omens
yet I tell people--well--
if it comes down in price

I keep looking at it
feeling its dignity
like the presence of some
old mother/matron
grasping the years
in a gloved fist
And the old woman looks at me
waiting to see what I will do

Tilling

You are turning the soil
in your wife's garden
this Saturday
earth so dry
it breaks
into clods
Your palms rub raw
against the wood handle
of the spade

The wind rises
lifts a sheet
of grey clouds
in the western sky
and draws them toward you
Next week you will be fifty

Last year
there was a woman
she planned hyacinth
a row of peas
some grapes
The earth around her house
is packed hard
and her garden
lies fallow

while you plunge spade
into the same darkness
every spring

Susan Stearns